DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 435 943 CG 029 647

AUTHOR Chassey, Richard A.
TITLE A Comparison of Moral Development of College Student Behavioral Offenders and Non-Offenders.
PUB DATE 1999-00-00
NOTE 14p.
PUB TYPE Reports - Research (143)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Behavior Problems; Campuses; *College Students; Colleges; Higher Education; *Moral Development; Moral Values; *On Campus Students; Research and Development; Student Adjustment; Student Attitudes; *Student Behavior; *Student Personnel Services; Value Judgment

ABSTRACT

This study compares the moral development of college students who have been involved in repeated behavioral offenses with those who have not. Sixteen female and 13 male students from a Southern research university participated by taking the Defining Issues Test. The paper reports that a significant difference in moral development was found between offenders and non-offenders. An analysis of responses appears to indicate the two groups of students are dealing with the same issues but from a very different cognitive perspective. The researchers find it likely that the nature and necessity of university policies are understood by students at a Conventional moral level, resulting in fewer policy violations. For students at a Pre-Conventional, egocentric moral level, it is reasonable to assume that policies would be viewed as an unnecessary restriction on one's free will. Policies would be violated more frequently, resulting in more Pre-Conventional level students involved in disciplinary cases. The paper concludes that more research is needed in this area given the amount of time spent on discipline by student affairs professionals. (Contains 17 references.) (JDM)

Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made
from the original document.

ED 435 943

Running Head: COMPARISON OF MORAL DEVELOPMENT

A Comparison of Moral Development of College Student Behavioral Offenders and Non-Offenders

Richard A. Chassey

Blackburn College

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

☐ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

R CHASSEY

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC).

CG029647

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Abstract

This study compares the moral development of college students who have been involved in repeated behavioral offenses to those who have not. A significant difference in moral development was found between the groups. Discussion of the results centers on discipline philosophy and interventions, with suggestions for future research.

A Comparison of Moral Development of College Student Behavioral Offenders and Non-Offenders

Colleges and universities spend significant amounts of time dealing with student problem behavior; to the point where several professional staff may be assigned this as their specific function. These staff members, most commonly found in Dean of Students offices and Departments of Residence Life, operate on the assumption that student behavior management should be "educational" in nature. This assumption has not been tested, and indeed, student development staff have little research to rely on which explains why students violate institutional policies. Knowledge of a student's level of cognitive development, and more specifically, an individual's level of moral judgment has significant implications for the design of a developmental intervention for that student (Hedin, 1979; Colby & Kohlberg, 1987). This study compares moral development of students who have a disciplinary record versus students who do not.

Student discipline and problem behavior is a consistent theme in the literature. One of the earliest references to an educational approach to behavior management is found in Wrenn (1951). First, Wrenn proposed that the most constructive approach is to find and address the causes of the behavior. Second, that student development staff must focus on the "learning values of the experience for the student" (Wrenn, 1951, p. 455). Williamson (1961) also promoted the educational approach to discipline "...the harsh repressive-punishment approach to control student behavior must be replaced by more humane efforts to teach them the necessary adaptation of behavior..."(p. 158). Williamson felt the role of the student development staff is to help the student become an effective member of the "group".

Research on student discipline and problem behavior through the early 1970's focused on finding common characteristics among behavioral offenders in order to develop a "profile" of these students. The prevailing characteristics were first year status, lower grade point average, affiliation with a Greek organization, alcohol use, lower ability to control impulses, greater

interest and participation in social activities, and general non-conformance with authority (Tisdale & Brown, 1965; LeMay, 1968; Lenning, 1970).

Smith (1978) administered an early version of the Defining Issues Test (Rest, 1986) and a "discipline interview questionnaire" to 45 males and 10 females who admitted violating the institution's code of student conduct in the 1975 and 76 academic year. The Defining Issues Test (DIT) is a pencil and paper assessment of ethical judgment based on the cognitive-developmental theory of moral development proposed by Lawrence Kohlberg (Colby & Kohlberg, 1987). No control group was used. Fifty-eight percent were first or second year students, 38% third or fourth year students, and 2% graduate students.

Smith found that the students who had violated university policies scored significantly lower than the DIT norm population. Differences for age, gender, socioeconomic status, and ethnicity were non significant. Throughout the university disciplinary process, students who scored lower on the DIT reflected an emphasis on the negative consequences of violating conduct rules. Students with higher scores focused on what they could learn about self and others. Smith noted that "The discipline experience evidently is perceived quite differently by those at different developmental levels of moral thinking - an important distinction to be kept in mind by those handling campus discipline." (p. 292). Smith's findings on the student offender's experience in a disciplinary process are compelling. The lower DIT scores found among the student offenders are also an important result, although the findings are limited by the lack of a control group.

Tracey, Foster, Perkins, and Hillman (1979) attempted to determine the characteristics of student offenders. The researchers reviewed 131 discipline case files from an institutions 1973-74, 1974-75, and 1975-76 academic years, and compared student offenders with the general university population of 1974-75 on variables including: academic year, place of residence, area of study, and gender. They found that: 1) the student offender group had few

graduate students, 2) living in a large residence hall contributed to problems; 3) more males were represented.

Janosik, Davis, and Spencer (1985) attempted to determine the characteristics of repeat offenders at one institution over a six year period. The researchers reviewed 340 disciplinary case files from 1978-79 through 1983-84. All violations were included. Cases were compared with the university population from the same six year period. Demographic data such as gender, GPA, residence, year and area of study were analyzed. The researchers found that the files indicated: 1) more men involved in disciplinary cases; 2) more problems with large (over 600 students) residence halls; 3) more sophomores involved in disciplinary cases; 4) more students in Arts and Sciences involved in disciplinary cases; 5) Lower grade point averages among offenders.

Janosik, Dunn, and Spencer (1986) drew a random sample of 100 repeat and 100 first offender case files from a university judicial system. Comparisons were made of demographic data. The results indicated that: 1) males were again over represented in both first and repeat status; 2) sophomores were over represented as repeat offenders; 3) Repeat offenders were more likely to be involved in cases involving abusive conduct, alcohol, failure to comply with university officials, and theft. The authors note "...more research is needed to determine the reasons behind student misconduct. Measuring the level of moral reasoning, the degree of satisfaction with the institution, and the degree of student involvement in the same environment may shed additional light on the subject of student misconduct on college campuses." (p. 50).

Van Kuren and Creamer (1989) attempted to develop a predictive model of college student disciplinary status. The model was based on social control theory, containment theory, and involvement theory. It focused on person-environment fit models, which emphasize the quality of the student-campus relationship as largely influencing the quality of outcomes for students. Participants (174 male, 174 female) completed the College Student Experiences Questionnaire. The researchers found that year in college, parents educational level, and

positive opinion about the institution were directly related to discipline. The students assessment of whether they would enroll again at the same college if starting over had the strongest relationship. Student self-estimates of personal development gains, and estimates of vocational development gains were found to be indirectly related to discipline. No gender differences were found.

In summary, three types of studies are found in the literature. The first type are "profile" studies which attempt to determine the characteristics of student offenders either through demographic variables or through scoring on various psychological instruments. This information does not allow theoretical prediction of behavior. The second type are the developmental studies which attempt to investigate development issues by using instruments like the Defining Issues Test. Unfortunately, these studies lack control groups, which limits the ability to generalize from the results. The third type are the person-environment interaction studies. These studies allow prediction of behavior, but are difficult to apply to a developmental intervention.

This study attempted to remedy this situation by comparing the percentage of principled reasoning (P-score) measured by the Defining Issues Test between first-year students who have and have not been cited for repeated discipline violations in residence halls. It was hypothesised that the mean P-score of student behavioral offenders would be lower than the mean score of student non-offenders.

Methodology

Instrument

The Defining Issues Test, or DIT (Rest, 1979a, 1986) was used for the measure of moral development. The DIT presents moral dilemmas and a series of issues or questions that a person might consider in making a decision about what ought to be done in the situation. The participant is asked to consider each of the issues and then indicate which ones are important in making a decision. The P-score is the relative importance that participants attribute to questions

that require principled, or higher moral stage thought. The score is expressed as a percentage, and can range from 0 to 95. The DIT also has a consistency check in the "M" score, which indicates the percent response to items which sound profound, but are actually meaningless.

Data Collection

The experimental design and data collection methods were developed in compliance with the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act of 1974, which protects confidentiality of student educational and disciplinary records. Professional live-in housing staff with official access to disciplinary records were asked to develop two lists of first-year students in their residence areas; those who had two or more behavioral offenses, and those who had not been reported for any offenses. Following instruction in random selection methods, the professional staff members sent randomly selected students in each group an instrument packet. Each packet consisted of a cover letter, demographic data sheet, the DIT, and an self-addressed, stamped envelope. The data sheet included this question: "In a few sentences, please describe a recent decision you have made that you feel was about a social/moral issue. What was the issue, what did you decide, and why?" Participants were instructed in the cover letter not to identify themselves on the instrument, and to mail the sealed envelope with the completed instrument to the researcher. The personal identity and individual disciplinary status of participants was protected through three means: the researcher did not do any group assignments; the participants did not identify themselves on the instrument; and no follow-up survey was sent. Participants were informed on the cover letter that completing the instrument was voluntary; they were not informed of the hypothesis of the study. Ninety instruments were sent to each group for a total of 180. Thirty-five instruments were returned for a response rate of 19.4%. Six instruments were discarded due to incomplete responses or a high response to meaningless items.

Participants

This study was conducted at a southern research university. The total sample consisted of 16 females and 13 males. Twelve percent of the participants were African-American, 6% Native American, and 82% Caucasian. The average age of the students was 18.21 years.

Results

A one-way analysis of variance procedure found a significant difference between student offenders ($\underline{M}$ = 33.07) and non-offenders ($\underline{M}$ = 46.50), $\underline{F}(1, 27) = 6.73$, $\underline{p} < .025$. No significant differences were found for race or gender. Twenty-three of the participants responded to the question regarding a recent social/moral decision. Of those responding, the two most frequent issues reflected themes involving decisions on using alcohol and other drugs (35%) or having sexual intercourse (30%). The next most frequent theme involved lying to others (4%). Other themes included abortion, taking a fiancee's surname, returning found property, voting, breaking university policy, and conflicts with a roommate. No significant differences were found in the frequencies of issues reported by either group.

Discussion

There is evidence that students in this sample who had committed repeated behavioral offenses are scored 13 to 14 points lower than students who had committed no offenses. These results are very similar to the means reported by Smith (1978). Although the DIT P-score reports a total percentage of principled thinking, it is conceptually helpful to relate P-scores to Kohlberg's levels of moral judgment. A P-score of 47 corresponds roughly to the Conventional level of moral reasoning; which is the level at which most average college students are found (Colby & Kohlberg, 1987). A P-score of 33 corresponds roughly to Pre-Conventional moral reasoning (Gielen, 1991). The differences between Pre-Conventional and Conventional levels of thought are distinct. In general, a Pre-Conventional level student egocentrically perceives morality as serving one's own needs and interests, often over the needs and interests of others. Rules are valuable and observed only where they meet immediate needs. Where needs conflict, an equal exchange is considered "fair". The Conventional level student, on the other hand, is beginning to take the perspective of others in society. Morality is perceived in terms of maintaining relationships and the social system. Notice the contrast in the following responses to the question regarding a recent decision on a social/moral issue.

First student (P-score: 24): "Issue was whether or not to sleep with this girl even though I didn't really like her. I slept with her. I just felt like she could make me feel better about myself.".

Second student (P-score 46): "I decided not to have sex with somebody I just met--to stay faithful to a relationship.".

It is important to note that the theme analysis of the responses to this question appears to indicate that the student offenders and non-offenders are dealing with the same issues, but according to the P-scores from the DIT, from a very different cognitive perspective. Most university policies are intended to protect the rights of students, prevent damage to property, and in short, to establish a community social system. It is likely that the nature and necessity of such policies is understood by students at a Conventional moral level, resulting in fewer policy violations. For students at a Pre-Conventional, egocentric moral level, it is reasonable to assume polices would be viewed as an unnecessary restriction on one's free will. Policies would be violated more frequently, resulting in more Pre-Conventional level students involved in disciplinary cases.

Dannells (1991) in a ten year study found little or no change in institutional responses to student problem behavior. Dannells noted that "more attention should be given . . . to translating developmental theory into disciplinary practice, and in our research, to developing process models to aid in that translation" (p. 169). It is likely that the educational themes passed on from Wrenn (1951) and Williamson (1961) are insufficient in that short-term discussions intended to educate a student-offender in the social perspectives necessary to live in a residential setting may be ineffective if that student is operating from an egocentric cognitive perspective. The only thing a student-offender may be learning in this situation is not to get caught again. Research on developmental interventions (Hedin, 1979; Rest, 1986; Colby & Kohlberg, 1987; Sprinthall, Reiman & Thies-Sprinthall, 1993) indicates that an intervention

needs to be tailored to the developmental level of the participant, be relatively long term, and involve some opportunity for reflection.

Given the amount of time spent on discipline by Student Affairs professionals, more research is needed in this area. This study is limited by a low response rate, and should be replicated with larger numbers. Following Dannells (1991) suggestion, more research investigating student problem behavior should be done in order to provide the foundation for practice. As cognitive, behavioral and environmental factors related to student problem behavior are identified, intervention studies specifically aimed at moral development and behavior management could be implemented to expand our knowledge

References

Colby, A. & Kohlberg, L. (1987). The measure of moral judgment. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Dannells, M. (1991). Changes in student misconduct and institutional response over ten years. Journal of College Student Development, 32, 166-170.

Gielen, U. (1991). Research on moral reasoning. In L. Kuhmerker (Ed.), The Kohlberg legacy for the helping professions (pp. 39-61). Birmingham, AL: R.E.P. Books.

Hedin, D. (1979). Teenage health educators: An action learning program to promote psychological development. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, Minnesota.

Janosik, S., Davis, M., & Spencer, E. (1985). Characteristics of repeat offenders: A six year study. Journal of College Student Personnel, 26, 410-444.

Janosik, S., Dunn, P., & Spencer, E. (1986) Student misconduct: differences between first and repeat offenders. College Student Affairs Journal, 7, 46-51.

LeMay, M. (1968). College disciplinary problems: A review. Journal of College Student Personnel, 9, 180-189.

Lenning, O. (1970). Understanding the student lawbreaker. Journal of College Student Personnel, 11, 62-68.

Rest, J. (1979a). Development in judging moral issues. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.

Rest, J. (1986). Moral development: Advances in research and theory. New York: Praeger Publishers.

Smith, A.F. (1978). Developmental issues and themes in the discipline setting. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Ohio State University, Columbus, Ohio.

Sprinthall, N., Reiman, A., & Theis-Sprinthall, L. (1993). Roletaking and reflection. Learning and Individual Differences, 5, 283-299.

Tisdale, J. & Brown, F. (1965). Characteristics of college misconduct cases. Journal of College Student Personnel, 6, 359-366.

Tracey, T., Foster, M., Perkins, D., & Hillman, L. (1979). Characteristics of student offenders: Some new findings and suggested improvements in research methodology. Journal of College Student Personnel, 20, 492-467.

Van Kuren, N.E. & Creamer, D.G. (1989). Conceptualization and testing of a causal model of college student disciplinary status. Journal of College Student Development, 30, 3, 257-265.

Williamson, E. G. (1961). Student personnel services in colleges and universities. New York: McGraw-Hill.

Wrenn, C. G. (1951). Student personnel work in college. New York: Ronald Press.